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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creation and implementation of a one-semester English as a Second Language (ESL) course in Taiwan that is built around videotape recordings of English used in television programs in various contexts. The course uses common television programs, such as news broadcasts, music videos, travel programs, and commercials, to introduce students to idiomatic English in a classroom setting. The advantages of using news broadcasts are their availability, timeliness of subject matter, short length of individual stories, authentic language, clear and grammatically correct language, exposure to many varieties of language in interview segments, and visual aids and captions. The difficulties of using news broadcasts include choosing stories of interest to the students, the translation of place and personal names, and the over-abundance of place and proper names. These shortcomings can be overcome by repeated playing of broadcasts, along with discussion and analysis of the material being viewed. An appendix presents a suggested outline for a 15-meeting course designed around videotape sources and a guide to choosing news stories for classroom use. (Contains 8 references.) (MDM)

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TURNING THE TABLES: CHOOSE THE VIDEOS, CONSTRUCT THE COURSE

A paper presented at
the 27th Annual TESOL Convention
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INTRODUCTION

One of the problems facing teachers in EFL contexts is providing students with sufficient input in the target language. At advanced levels in particular, students, and even teachers, may become bored with the usual twenty-lesson textbook with accompanying audiotape and the usual exercises. To remedy this situation, some students seek out native speakers in the community, even joining Bible study classes in order the get more practice in English. Other less aggressive students may feel they have nowhere to turn for additional input and practice. Because they want or feel they need teacher guidance, they take more courses.

Yet in the economic powerhouses of East Asia, Taiwan included, English is all around us. Daily newspapers are published in English. Libraries contain books in English on all manner of subjects. Time and Newsweek arrive promptly by subscription. English movies are shown in theaters, English programs appear on Taiwan's TV stations, though both these media include Chinese subtitles. Radio stations and satellite TV stations broadcasting in English compete for our leisure time attention. Thus Taiwan's students have ample opportunity to get

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input in English.

The brighter, more active, more persistent students have the habit of using these opportunities and, generally speaking, these students use English well. However, the majority of students seem to view English as a subject to be mastered, or rather memorized, a test to pass, rather than as a tool to learn or do something else. And using tools requires real-life practice. In order to use English effectively in the modern world, they will eventually have to read authentic texts in their specialty at least and interact with native speakers using their listening and speaking skills.

Many students are afraid. Memorizing vocabulary or grammar rules and repeating them on tests is safe and predictable, using authentic material is not. Dealing with the unknown is scary; we may make mistakes and lose face. Yet is must be done. Perhaps the biggest job an EFL teacher has in dealing with Chinese and other East Asian students is helping them gain confidence in their own abilities to use their English skills AND their communication skills to survive in authentic language situations. In short, if we cannot dump our students into the middle of Kansas for a whole semester, we have to provide them with other opportunities to sharpen their English survival skills.

The area of listening provides a particular challenge. There is certainly enough English on the air waves, but most students are afraid of it. A common complaint about ICRT, a Taiwan radio station that broadcasts in English and whose DJs are native speakers, is "they speak too fast". While it would be fair to say that American radio announcers, particularly those

catering to young people's tastes, tend to speak rather rapidly and use some slang expressions, we could also say that th ICRT speakers are speaking at the speed American radio announcers usually speak, so the speed is appropriate for the context. Thus if we turn this situation around to the native speaker's view, it's not that the announcers are speaking too rapidly, it's that the students are listening too slowly!

Listening to the radio can be a bit difficult because we only have our ears to guide us. Television is generally much easier to understand because the visual images can reinforce the spoken ones. Yet students voice fears about watching authentic television, too. In Taiwan, English movies in the theaters and English programs on Taiwan's three TV stations are all subtitled in Chinese; some are also dubbed in Chinese (because of the many dialects, all Chinese programs except the news are also subtitled in Chinese). Students admit to reading subtitles and panic without them. They somehow believe that since they don't understand every word with one listening, they don't understand anything. They say it's too hard and give up.

This fear of not comprehending one hundred percent of each utterance is probably related to their attitude toward reading comprehension. Despite patient teaching of skimming and scanning techniques, teachers still complain that most of their students read word by word, laboriously looking up each new word in a dictionary as they encounter it without trying the guess the meaning from context or get the main idea of the sentence or paragraph. Yet while the written word stays on the page in a

form we can readily check, the spoken word has no such permanence or clarity. If students cannot comprehend what the word or phrase was, they cannot check its meaning in a dictionary. Hence the even greater fear of listening to authentic material.

So what can the teacher do to bridge this gap, to give students practice and confidence in their ability to listen to authentic English material? More importantly, how can we teachers get students to use the input around them to continue practicing and perfecting their listening skills?

With these questions in mind, in Spring 1992 I initiated a new course for second year university English majors which I called Advanced Listening and Speaking with Video. Our students had previously expressed the desire to have more listening and speaking opportunities. Furthermore, I thought if I could give them exposure to the kinds of video programs they could watch at home in English and show them some strategies they could use to aid in their comprehension, they could later learn from video on their own to suit their own interests. What I discuss below then is some of the characteristics of the course--course design, assignments, homework--and some of the problems I encountered and my attempts to solve them.

COURSE DESIGN

The biggest problem in basing a course around video is finding suitable materials. Essentially one IS bound by the programs available. I had starting collecting materials about one year before I decided I had enough to start a one-semester course. I used as my basic materials news broadcasts,

supplemented by various activities I had seen others demonstrate--such as music videos, travel shows, commercials--or somehow created myself to fit a clip I thought might be fun to use. (An outline of this course as I am teaching it this semester appears in the Appendix). Because of time limitations, I will spend most time in this talk discussing the various uses of news broadcasts.

News broadcasts.

Advantages. With the problem of availability foremost in my mind, it seemed that the best way to start would be to use news programs, since every day in Taiwan we can watch news in English, from the 24-hour BBC World Service with its hourly news to various times of the day when parts of CNN, ABC, CBS, and PBS news are rebroadcast via Taiwan's TV stations or via Japan's satellite NHK. In addition, there are a few good video courses available that use new stories, so the teacher need not prepare all the materials herself.

A further selling point for exposing students to news broadcasts is that university students should be informed about what is happening in the world around them.

Using news has other advantages: topics are varied and the news is really "news". Because news broadcasts consist of many stories, each of which are relatively short and complete in themselves, the length of an individual story makes it ideal for classroom exploitation. Language teachers who have worked extensively with video (e.g. Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990) advise

using short segments (one to three minutes) for several specific language tasks rather than longer segments with vague goals. Thus the availability of many short segments enables us to choose one or two of these stories that may be most appropriate to the class's interests and abilities.

Perhaps most important, the language is authentic. Additionally, a particularly good feature of news broadcasts is that the TV anchors have clear and accurate pronunciation; furthermore, when we are watching the speaker's face, we find comprehension less difficult than we do when we only listen to the voice of the reporter in the field. Moreover, their grammar is correct, and they use the vocabulary and style of educated people. That is, newspeople tend to speak standard, socially acceptable varieties. Though students in Taiwan are trained in the American variety and complain about having to listen to British English, they nevertheless need to be able to comprehend at least the most standard British varieties. For this purpose, the BBC World Service and ITN are ideal.

In addition, news programs may expose us to many varieties of language, such as when South Africa's President F.W. de Klerk or Mr. Nelson Mandela or India's Prime Minister Rao are interviewed. We may hear many different geographical or nonstandard forms when the man in the street is asked his opinion. More and more often we hear nonnative speakers, such as Albania's President Berisha, using English as a lingua franca in world politics, economics, science, and many other fields. Our students will also need to utilize English in many situations in their future professions. They, as nonnative speakers, will have

ample opportunity to use English with other nonnative speakers they come into contact with professionally and personally. Even the less well-educated taxi drivers and McDonald's clerks have contacts with foreign visitors in English.

News broadcasts often also provide additional aids to comprehension. They may add information with apposition, paraphrase, or repetition to help us remember context, such as "George Bush, the American president,..." They show maps to help us locate the area in the world, such as a map of Asia with Cambodia pointed out. The name of the location is usually printed at the bottom of the screen when we hear the report from the scene. Names of famous or important people or experts being interviewed also appear on the screen. All these little extras help facilitate understanding, and we teachers can point these out to students.

SHOW CLIP OF HORSE STORY SILENTLY HERE AND THEN ASK ONE OR TWO MEMBERS OF THE AUDIENCE TO TELL THE STORY
(Point: We can often pick out the most important information or main idea just from the visual alone.)

Problems. One of the problems of using news stories is choosing a story the students will likely understand. Are the students familiar with the content? Here we should choose stories about situations that would also be covered in the local press, such as international issues or human interest stories. Students should be encouraged to read the newspapers or watch the news in their native language. That is, it is much easier to understand partially familiar information in a foreign language

than it is to understand completely new information.

In teaching news listening, a problem particular to Chinese is the translation of place and personal names. Foreign names are rendered in Chinese either by sound, by meaning, or by a mixture of both. The most common way, especially for personal names and increasingly for new place names, is to make the name fit the Chinese sound system. Since each language has a different set of sounds it uses, and since Mandarin is primarily open-syllabled, a foreign name can sound quite different when rendered phonetically in Chinese. (The examples used in this paper are taken from the Mandarin used on Taiwan and are transcribed using the Yale system. Tone is not indicated.)

Thus, President Bush becomes "Bu shi", Reagan "Lei gen", Russian President Yeltsin is "Yei er tsin", Philippine President Ramos is "La mo sz", while the Ukraine becomes "U ke lan". Each of these syllables also carries tone. In addition, characters have to be chosen to represent these sounds. There are a number of characters typically used for names; one would not want to render a friendly or neutral place or person by an unlucky or bad meaning character.

For personal names, the number of syllables must be considered. No matter how many syllables the foreign name has, it is usually made to conform to the Chinese system of three syllables. The first syllable is the family name, the second and third the personal name. Some Chinese names have two or four syllables, and some foreign names do, too: "Bu shi" (Bush), "Go ba chi fu" (Gorbachev). For foreign names, usually the whole

family name is used to make the Chinese rendition. Thus, Bill Clinton becomes "Ke lin dwun".

Many common place names that have been in use for quite a long time are rendered by meaning rather than sound. Thus "Mei gwo" (beautiful country) for the United States, "Jyou jin shan" (old golden mountain) for San Francisco. Other place names may reflect a mixture of both methods, such as "Nan sz la fu" for Yugoslavia. While the last three syllables are roughly the sounds for -slavia, the relationship between the first syllables in each word is as opaque to most Chinese as it is to most Americans, UNLESS you know that the Chinese "nan" is a direct translation of "yug" in the Slavic languages. Both mean "south"; the original name reflected the meaning "The Kingdom of the South Slavs".

With such differences in onomastics, it is no wonder Chinese students have difficulties with foreign names. Even when students recognize the obvious names--France, Germany--they may confuse the forms and say "He went to French" instead of France. But that kind of problem belongs more to the grammar; the student has learned the name but has not mastered the usage.

The problem in news watching is that there are so many names. Even if students are familiar with their rendition in Chinese, they may not make the connection. It may not be at all obvious that a sequence of Chinese characters is equivalent to a sequence of not identical sounds in English with a different number of syllables. Here the teacher must make a special effort to teach the spelling and the pronunciation. With the changes in the world happening at a faster and faster pace, new names come

in every day, and we may be teaching them in English even before our students have had a chance to see them in the Chinese press.

In addition to teaching names and other necessary vocabulary, I found it took time to explain the background of a story. Before presenting a news story about an on-going problem, I often asked students about the situation in that country. What the students could not give me, I would fill in.

For some areas of the world, particularly Eastern Europe, an area about which I am quite familiar and about which Taiwan's people know rather little, I sometimes felt I was giving a mini history lecture in order to give students sufficient background to understand both the story I would show and other reports they would hear or read about the area. In Spring 1992, the Soviet Union had just broken up and war was raging in the former Yugoslavia; talking about these topics was far from frivolous.

Summary of Teaching Techniques. A major problem with news listening is that it's gone too quickly, spoken once and gone, unlike the newspaper, which we can go over again and again and even check our dictionaries for hard words. There is a solution, however--the VCR. Viewing a second and third time often reveals more of the message to us. Students can be encouraged to do this on their own time if we have such facilities in our language labs, or if they have VCRs at home, as many Taiwan homes do.

In our classrooms there are various activities we can use to train students to be less passive viewers. We can watch a news story first without sound and try to predict the content. There may be maps or diagrams, and the location and interviewee's name

may appear at the bottom of the screen. These kinds of exercises illustrate very clearly how so much of any message comes from the visual portion. Students can also discover that their English ability is not the only factor that determines how much they understand.

We can pay attention to the structure of news reports. Usually the anchorperson summarizes the story in a few sentences, then we hear a reporter from the field giving more details and we are shown the actual scenes of the event, perhaps interspersed with quotes or comments by important people or ordinary citizens. Being aware of the general structure helps us to know what to expect next. This is the pattern most English language broadcasts use; it may not reflect the structure of news broadcasts from other cultures.

We can listen for the answers to the basic questions of Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? silently or with sound. If we can answer those, we have got the main idea. We can also ask students to listen for a few specific words in a one-minute story and write down as much of the context of that word as they remember; for example, each row can listen for a different word. In this way, students are paying close attention to all the words as they search for their own particular word. As Stempleski and Tomalin (1990) point out, when students have to search for one bit of information, they tend to listen very attentively to the whole in the process of searching for that bit, whereas if they have no task at all, they listen quite superficially to the whole.

We can prepare a cloze by presenting the text with blanks

and having students fill them in as they listen; they can also share their guesses with their classmates to decide which fits better (here they must consider if the word fits semantically as well as grammatically). We can make the cloze easier or harder to fit the level of the class; a useful stratgey is to leave out a little more information on each successive cloze.

Testing can be done with a few comprehension questions, sometimes True/False, sometimes multiple choice, sometimes fill-in or open ended, or we can even test with a cloze. Facilities permitting, students could even transcribe one complete news story. Once a student reaches that stage, she can use her own VCR at home and work with whatever material interests her.

Homework. This was a big problem the first time I taught the course because of limited facilities. As not all students can watch the same programs as they are being broadcast, we must consider other means of having students listen outside of class. One way is to have students keep a listening journal which we can check periodically. Here students can comment on English they have listened to from the media and other sources.

If we do have the facilities--a language lab equipped with individual video players and monitors with headphones--we can place tapes there for students to watch on their own time. For some tapes, all students may be required to watch them and write a summary or answer some questions. Others may be for optional viewing or for individual assignments.

Other Activities

The first time I taught the course, I tried using two documentaries (45 minutes long), one on Chinese medicine and one on the Mainland Chinese economy. These did not work well, perhaps because of length, because I did not prepare adequate pre-viewing activities, or, most likely, the students thought the topics were boring. I now believe such materials are best put on the optional viewing shelf for the few who are interested.

Though length is an important and generally shorter is better, topic plays a role. A 35-minute interview with the singer Madonna by the BBC's Terry Wogan kept all the students interested. Previewing activities included reviewing some of the slang terms used in the interview and a multiple choice questionnaire in which students guessed the answers concerning information found in the interview. These questions ranged from

> What is Madonna's natural hair color?
>
> to
>
> When Mr. Wogan asks Madonna if she thinks she frightens men, what do you think she will answer?
>
> (a) Men shouldn't be afraid of me.
> (b) If they are, they shouldn't come near me.
> (c) It's women that I frighten, not men.
> (d) What's there to be afraid of?

Students paid attention to the interview and afterwards, all could answer the questions. After a discussion of whether her behavior or her music is offensive, a topic which emerged in the interview, we finished this two-class lesson with one of Madonna's music videos viewed first silently for images and

impressions and then with sound and an almost completely open cloze.

Music videos are not only fun to use in class, but they are a rich source of language (Louise, 1991; Murphey, 1991). It is important though to choose one that has clear language, not too fast (forget rap--not even native speakers can figure that out), preferably with the singer's face shown singing some of the time. preferably one singer or one at a time. There should not be too much other noise or music over the voice, and the visuals should help, not hinder, guessing the words. Clear pronunciation is the most important. We can use pair word with visuals, guess the theme, speed, etc., and certainly try top complete a cloze. Students will not catch everything the first time, but they can help each other and guess by meaning and rhyme. For the first time, teachers can provide the harder words and let students, alone and in pairs, guess the easier words or the parts that rhyme. Often when the whole class has completed the cloze together, they want to watch the video again and sing along.

Travel shows which consist of short segments about each place (about three to five minutes) viewed silently provide students with a good opportunity to make up narratives together (Prime, 1992) as well as to listen for other information. Situation comedies offer a chance to practice authentic dialog. Commercials are good fillers for short activities, either silently for guessing the product or making up the narrative to pair work for noticing all the objects.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For a one-semester course meeting fifteen times for two hours each class, I have plenty of material. I use news stories approximately every other week amidst music videos, a travel show, an interview, and a few commercials and other short clips. As many of these activities take longer than I initially expected, I have more material than I can use.

The next step will be to separate out the news listening and offer a separate follow-up course that concentrates on news listening and uses one or a combination of the texts available. Though I do consider copyright when I use off-air materials, I do feel safer using news stories because the way they are used (excerpts which are eventually destroyed because they are no longer news) tends to fall into guidelines for educational use.

Although this course may seem to have no structure, in reality I am giving the students varied listening practice, and as the course progresses, I ask them to listen for more and more material. Music videos get a little more difficult to understand. News reports contain more varied accents. Cloze tests have more blanks. Nevertheless, when a student chooses to watch videos outside of class, difficulty levels will vary. With students who already have a fairly good command of English, I am not too concerned over controlling difficulty level. Choosing interesting or useful material and using with them activities with clear objectives seems more important at this level. Perhaps after a few more times teaching this course, I will have developed a more cohesive plan.

Using video takes a lot of preparation. A teacher starting

out might want to use an ELT text and video first to get used to using the equipment and become familiar with the various techniques and activities commonly used. Then you can try gradually to develop some off-air materials on your own. Such preparation takes a lot of thought--Can I use this kind of video in class? How? You may get to the point where every time you turn on your TV, you're observing the program's features for the classroom. You take TV less for granted. And, just like any lesson, even after spending much time preparing pre- and post-viewing activities, sometimes an activity still fails. Then another activity produces unexpectedly good results.

Finally, let us remember our real goal in providing students with language activities using authentic video: to show them that they can understand and enjoy watching programs in English (or any other foreign language). We hope they will eventually choose these materials for their own pleasure on their own time. It does not matter whether these are films, situation comedies, music videos, or football games--any and all of them will give students practice in getting information by means of English.

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APPENDIX

Possible Outline for a 15 Meeting Course (One Semester)

Week 1 Introduction to the Course, Pair Activity with Commercial

Week 2 News Stories (paying attention to visuals)

Week 3 Music Video Activities (visuals, pair work, cloze)

Week 4 News story (view silently, make up narrative/discussion)
Commercial

Week 5 News Stories (information questions and cloze)
Watch short clip--Homework written reaction

Week 6 Travel show (vocabulary, speaking activity--make up narrative, information questions)

Week 7 Sharing best of short clip written reactions
Assign midterm projects (each student works with a different video)
Commercial--guess the product

Week 8 News Stories

Week 9 Discussion of Documentary Topic, Watch Documentary

Week 10 Chaplin Clip with Pair Work, Creating Dialogue
Commercial--Create the Product

Week 11 News Stories

Week 12 Interview (previewing activities, watch)

Week 13 Discussion on previous interview, related music video

Week 14 News Stories

Week 15 FINAL EXAM (News Stories listening--information questions and cloze)

USING NEWS STORIES

Choosing a news story

--Choose stories students can read about or hear in their native language, those for which they are likely to have some background. These may tend to be international stories.
--Choose human interest stories or issues that can be introduced or followed up by discussion activities (e.g. pollution, children's rights)

--Avoid stories that require specific background knowledge students are not likely to have or are about faraway issues students are not likely to care about (e.g. the legal technicalities of a nurses' strike in Britain, unless the students are nurses or lawyers).

Possible activities with news stories Choose a combination of activities that fits the story best and ensures variety.

--Silent viewing for general idea. Trying to guess the answers to Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

--Silent viewing to pay attention to writing (place names, maps, graphs, etc.)

--Watching with sound for answers to the 6 WH questions, for specific words, for answers to content questions, for answers to True/False or Multiple Choice questions.

--Discussion activity before or after viewing (especially good with controversial social issues students are interested in).

--Completing a cloze, either as shared work or as a quiz, while watching (teacher pauses tape). With a small class and enough individual videotape players and monitors, each student could complete a cloze or an entire transcription at her own speed.

For some news stories, teachers may need to spend some time asking students some background questions before viewing, even though such stories may appear daily in the local press. For a story on the former Yugoslavia, for example, we would ask "Who is fighting whom and why?" at the very least. We may also have to teach correct spelling and pronunciation of names of people and places and some specific vocabulary (e.g. ceasefire). Students can also get spelling and vocabulary from English newspapers and magazines.

News stories have structure; this structure is not the same in all cultures/languages. For example, the BBC World Service begins a story with a summary of the main points by the anchor. That is the minumim. Then they switch to a reporter in the field who tells us the story in more detail with examples. His report may include a comment by an expert or a main participant in his story. Reporter in field says more. They may then repeat the participant/reporter sequence. When the anchor reappears, it is to begin another story. If students are aware of the structure, they have some idea what kind of information is coming next.